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WASHINGTON

COX SAYS LESSON OF WATERGATE IS BEING FORGOTTEN

BY ARNOLD B. SAWISLAK

The Watergate special prosecutor fired by Richard Nixon in "The Saturday Night Massacre" said Wednesday some of the reforms that followed the scandal a decade ago are being weakened by the Reagan administration.

Archibald Cox, the central figure in the wave of high-level firings that accelerated Nixon's forced resignation, issued the warning as chairman of Common Cause, the citizen action lobby that promoted many of the reforms that followed the Watergate scandal disclosures.

Writing a foreword to a 47-page study entitled, "The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later," Cox said, "For a time, Washington seemed aware of the dangerous fruits of secrecy. The Freedom of Information Act was strengthened. Restrictions were placed on the secret domestic policies of the Central Intelligence Agency and FBI.

"Unfortunately, there is reason to believe that the lesson is being forgotten in administration circles. There is talk of weakening the Freedom of Information Act. Restraints upon the covert domestic activities of the FBI and the CIA have been relaxed."

"Watergate, and revisionists' effort to weaken or repeal the reforms, teach the need for constant public vigilance against not only the corrupting influence of power but also the cynicism of those who scorn the basic idealism of the American people," Cox said.

Among the anti-reform developments listed by the study's author, D. Michal Freedman, were:

-Attorney General William French Smith's request to Congress to repeal the special prosecutor provision of the Ethics in Government Act.

-White House counsel Fred Fielding's recommendation that financial disclosure statements of federal officials be available only to Congress, not the public.

-Smith's reversal of a previous policy to release material requested under the Freedom of Information Act unless it was "demonstrably harmful."

-Action by Assistant Attorney General Jonathan Rose to narrow the previous policy of waiving fees for information searches under the Freedom of Information Act.

-And an executive order by President Reagan that "greatly expands the CIA's authority to conduct intelligence operations in the United States."

-Orders and directives no longer requiring the director of the CIA to submit "all proposed sensitive operations to the National Security Council for review" and "limiting the activities of the president's Intelligence Oversight Board to reviewing matters of legality -- not propriety -- as it had under previous administrations."